

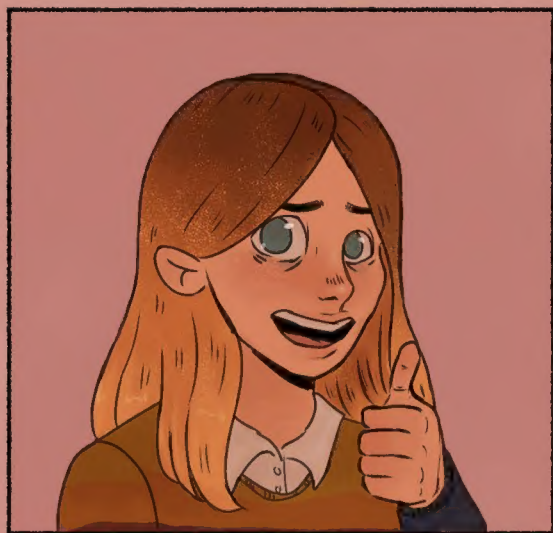


JESSICA JOHNSON

THE YEAR WE SPENT ALONE:  
AN ORAL HISTORY

STORIES OF  
THE PANDEMIC  
AS TOLD BY  
RESIDENTS OF  
WALTHAM FOREST





# I DIDN'T WRITE ANY OF THIS BOOK (MORE OR LESS)

When I set out to do this project, I really wasn't sure if anyone would even be interested in taking part. It feels like everything that could be said about the pandemic, its effect on the economy, mental health, any and every social topic under the sun- has probably already been said. Probably more than once. "The pandemic" has joined the ranks of "the weather" in terms of milquetoast small talk, and "Brexit" in terms of political swear jars.

And yet- somehow it also feels like no one wants to talk about it at all. Like, we all went through this collective trauma (to varying degrees) of loss, loneliness and the slow realisation that the people in power are really just as clueless as the rest of us when shit hits the fan... and what, we're expected to just go back to our regular lives like nothing happened?

As it turned out, people did want to talk about it. I interviewed 14 people who lived and/or worked in Waltham Forest for this project, and I'm sure if I had had more time it would have been more. It was a privilege to hear their stories- sometimes filled with solitude and grief, but more often than not, joy and kinship. I hope I have done them justice.

Also- this is not the final version of this comic! I wasn't able to draw comics for everyone who participated in the deadline given, but I plan to complete the project in my own time in the coming months. Follow me on Instagram (@glitztea) for updates on the project and also if you're interested in keeping up with my work as an illustrator, designer and musician.

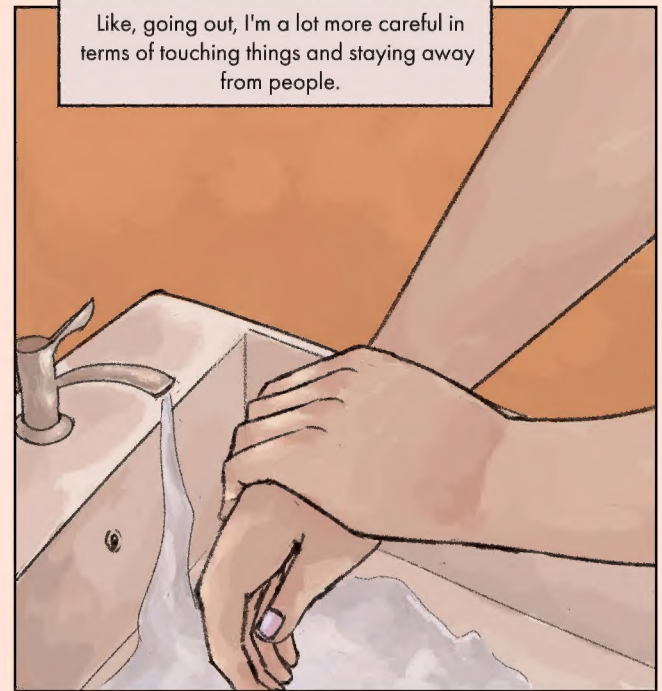
If you would like to work with me, or have any burning questions about this book, shoot me an email at [glitztea@gmail.com](mailto:glitztea@gmail.com). I'd love to talk!



# MATILDA



I think like, I'm just a lot more aware of public health in general.



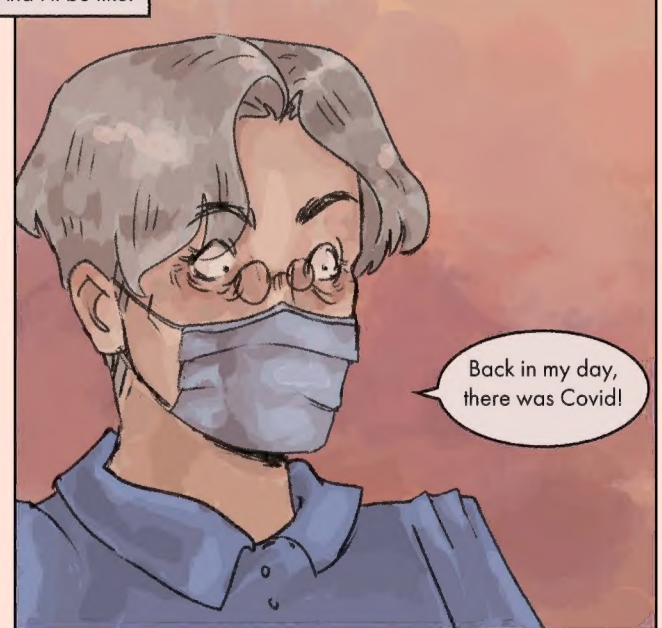
Like, going out, I'm a lot more careful in terms of touching things and staying away from people.

I'm gonna have grandkids and they're gonna be like:



What the hell, what are you doing?

And I'll be like:



Back in my day, there was Covid!



I think it's good we have a new awareness of disease and preventing this from happening again. But I don't know how quickly that will be lost.



Because obviously there have been big outbreaks of disease in the past and we kinda haven't learnt our lessons from them.

The knowledge of how severe those were has kinda faded, so I guess this will probably fade as well.



I was on a flight to Vienna in January.

There were many people wearing masks, which was very unusual for a British Airways flight to Vienna.

# JEAN



At first I thought it was a bit odd, that people were wearing masks on a two hour long flight for no apparent reason.



And yet we got to the stage where we all wore masks.



And then we got to the stage where I found it very odd when people didn't wear masks.





I was actually relieved when lockdown was announced. I thought it should have happened sooner.



I think it could have saved a lot of lives had it happened even a couple of weeks sooner.



Being in the over sixties age group, I was possibly more aware than others of the potential of serious illness.



We became so insular because of 2020 and 2021... to a great extent we stopped socialising. We haven't really gone back to where we were before.



I can count on three fingers the times we've been out.





I was prevented from going to work.  
I used to work for a construction  
company and we weren't allowed  
to go to work.

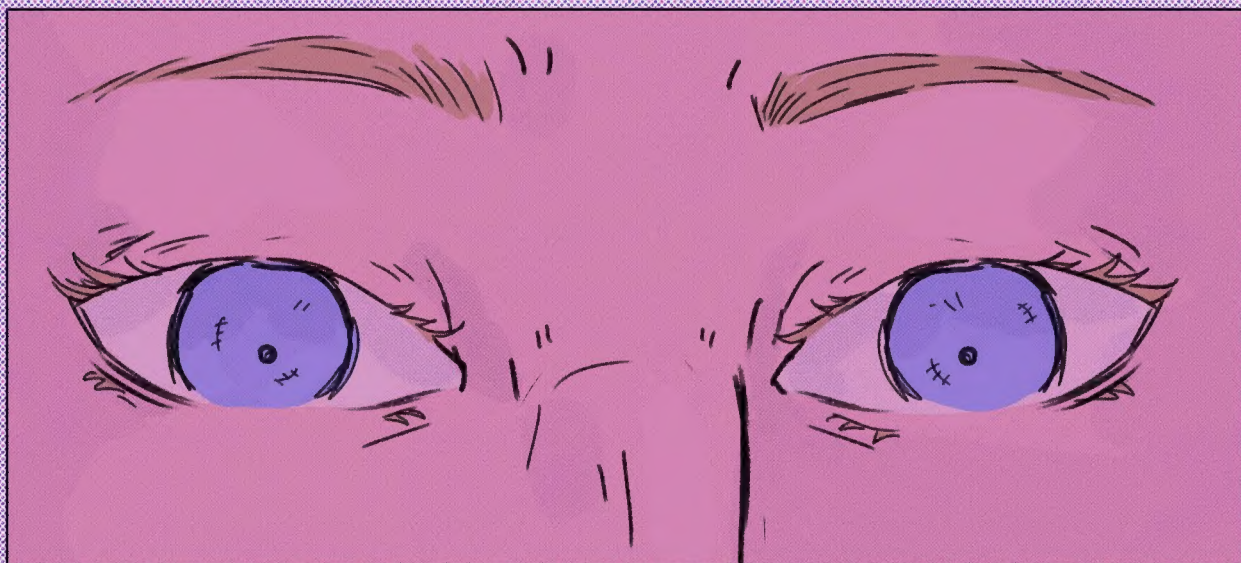
# TOM



That was about... March, maybe? That was definitely  
when I realised it was more serious.



I was absolutely gutted, just,  
all my bread and butter just taken away.



My coworkers were just as gutted, probably. But they were a lot older than me, so had a lot more like, private job opportunities.



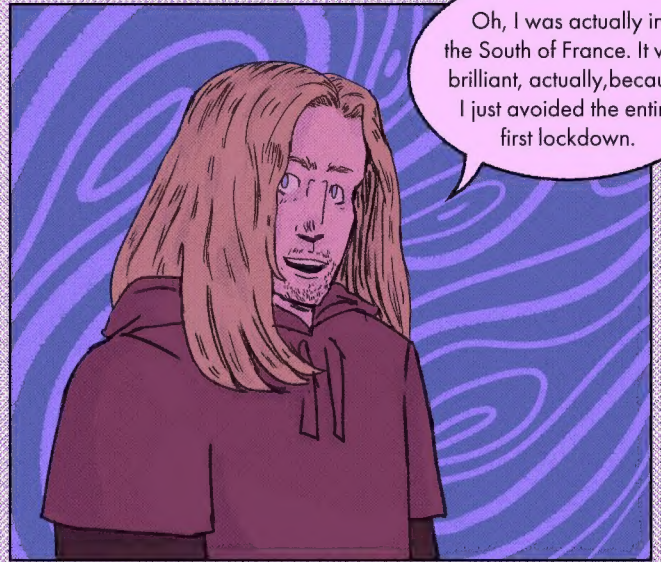
But I didn't because I was quite young working  
construction, and didn't have any qualifications.  
They handled it better than I did, probably.



Where was I when lockdown was announced? Lockdown...



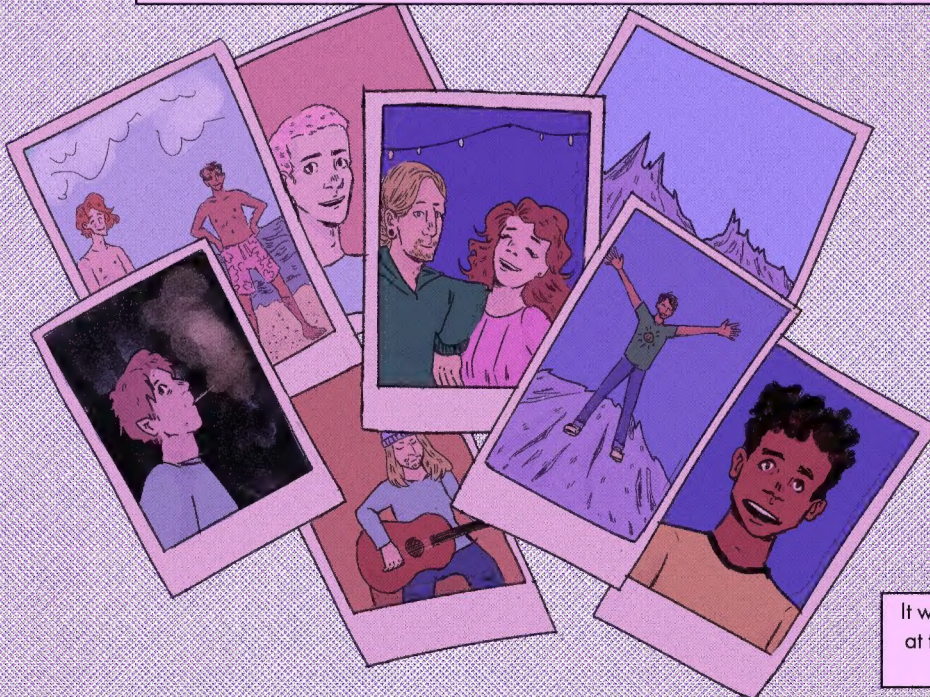
Oh, I was actually in the South of France. It was brilliant, actually, because I just avoided the entire first lockdown.



I was on a mountain, in this little hut. I went because I saw a load of shit come in. I went with a couple of people I was close with at the time to avoid the amount of shit, and I stayed there for about five months until the lockdown sort of eased. Without sounding ignorant, I was completely oblivious to how serious the lockdown was at the time.



Everyone I was surrounding myself with, in France, 'cos it's so rural, I guess.- they don't want anything to do with it. To them, the lockdown was irrelevant because they're so loosely populated around there. Nothing was affecting them at all, really.



It was the best thing I could have done at the time. I was easily forgetting my life back home.



# NATHAN

I remember looking at my parents like:



Oh, yeah, I knew this was going to happen.



I've been reading the **thinkpeices.**



...I'm gonna go back to my room.



I created this new way of living in my room, where I would do my lessons online



And I would go downstairs and I would make myself a meal.



And then go back upstairs and watch a video and then do another lesson and do a bit of revising



And then just like - "oh, look at me, I'm like a little office man! Doing my little office work!"



And I would go to bed at a regular time



And hang out with my friends on zoom calls.



It was all very much "This is a structured life that I'm living! I'm adapting to the pandemic."



I never clapped for the NHS, which I felt bad about.



My mum loved doing that shit!

But am I getting dressed? I was wearing the same clothes for like, three days straight, you think I'm going to go outside in my manky arse jumper and-



They can't hear me! Whipps Cross is two miles away!



Also, because I live in the suburbs, our houses are quite far apart. It can be quite distant, really.

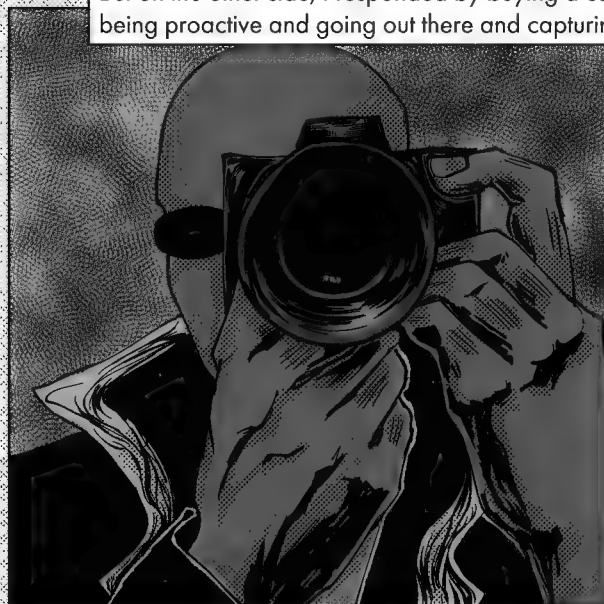




It locked off a lot of opportunities in terms of my work.



But on the other side, I responded by buying a camera and being proactive and going out there and capturing footage.



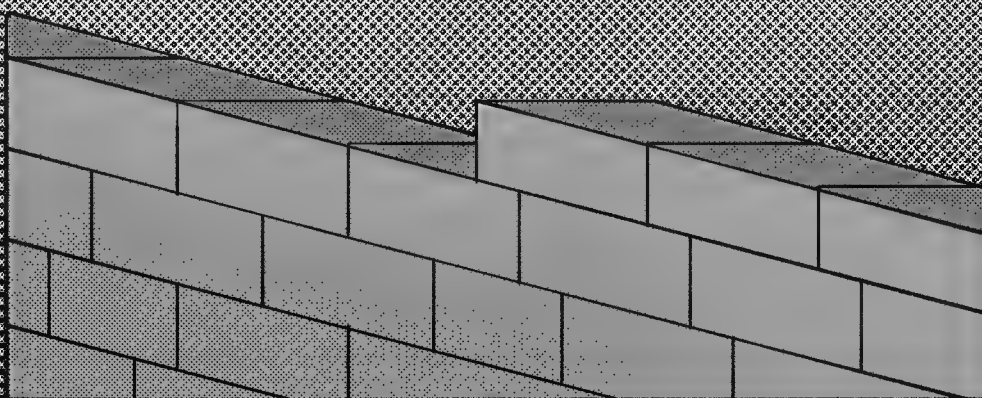
And I got some really good shots, because the roads were empty.

I was really proactive in music, and recording and video stuff, and editing.



I was developing a house, I did some handyman work.  
I learnt how to build a wall.

It went by fast.





I thought it was all a scam, to be honest. A bit of a farce. I still do feel, it's blown out of proportion.



If you think about today, in current affairs..., Russia and Ukraine,, all of a sudden it's like Covid decided to stop affecting people and being on the front page.

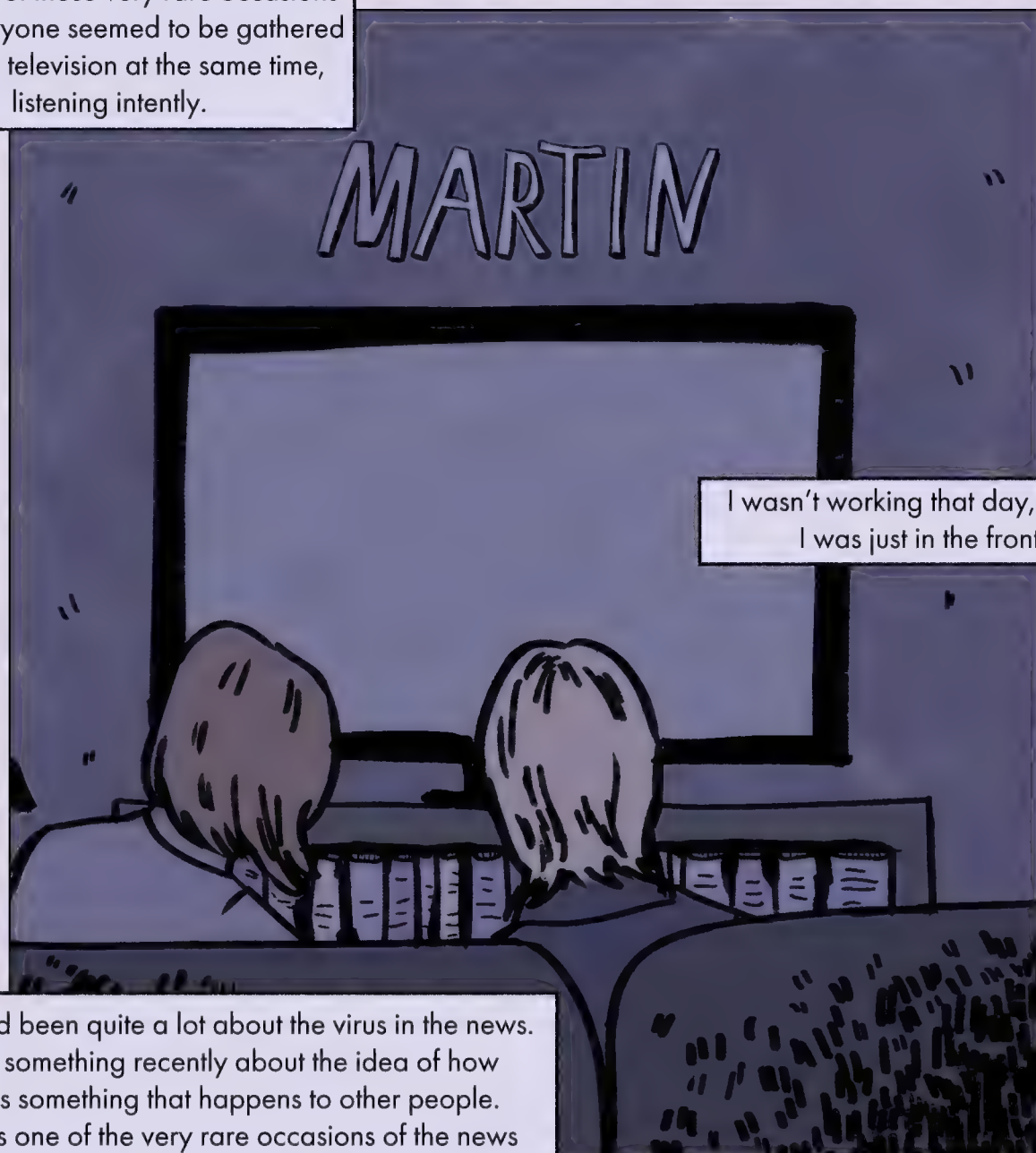
I wouldn't say fake, but it wasn't as serious as it was made out to be.



# MORPHEUS



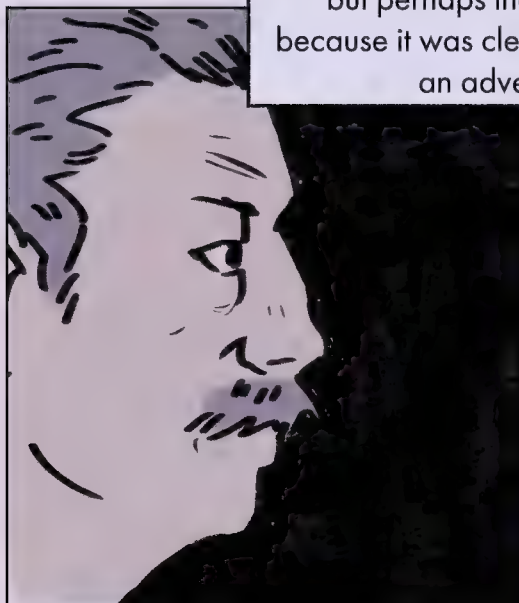
It was one of those very rare occasions where everyone seemed to be gathered round the television at the same time, listening intently.



I wasn't working that day, I don't think. I was just in the front room.

There had been quite a lot about the virus in the news. I read something recently about the idea of how news is something that happens to other people. This was one of the very rare occasions of the news being something directly applicable.

I mean perhaps- perhaps- this is unusual, but perhaps there was a slight thrill, because it was clear there was going to be an adventure, of sorts.





I'm a musician and most of my work is performing, so that stopped immediately.

Initially, I was not doing very much.

Although it didn't seem it was that long before projects arose that could be online.

Someone I work with started doing a thing of concerts in his kitchen.

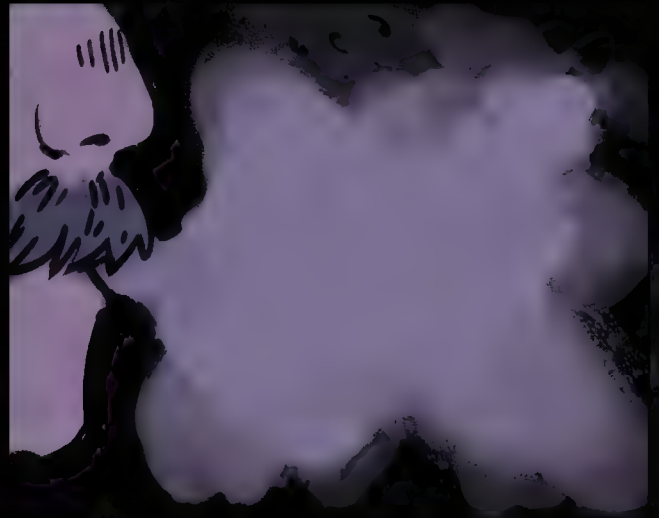
He's a trumpeter and he got a number of us to record backing tracks for him to play live to.



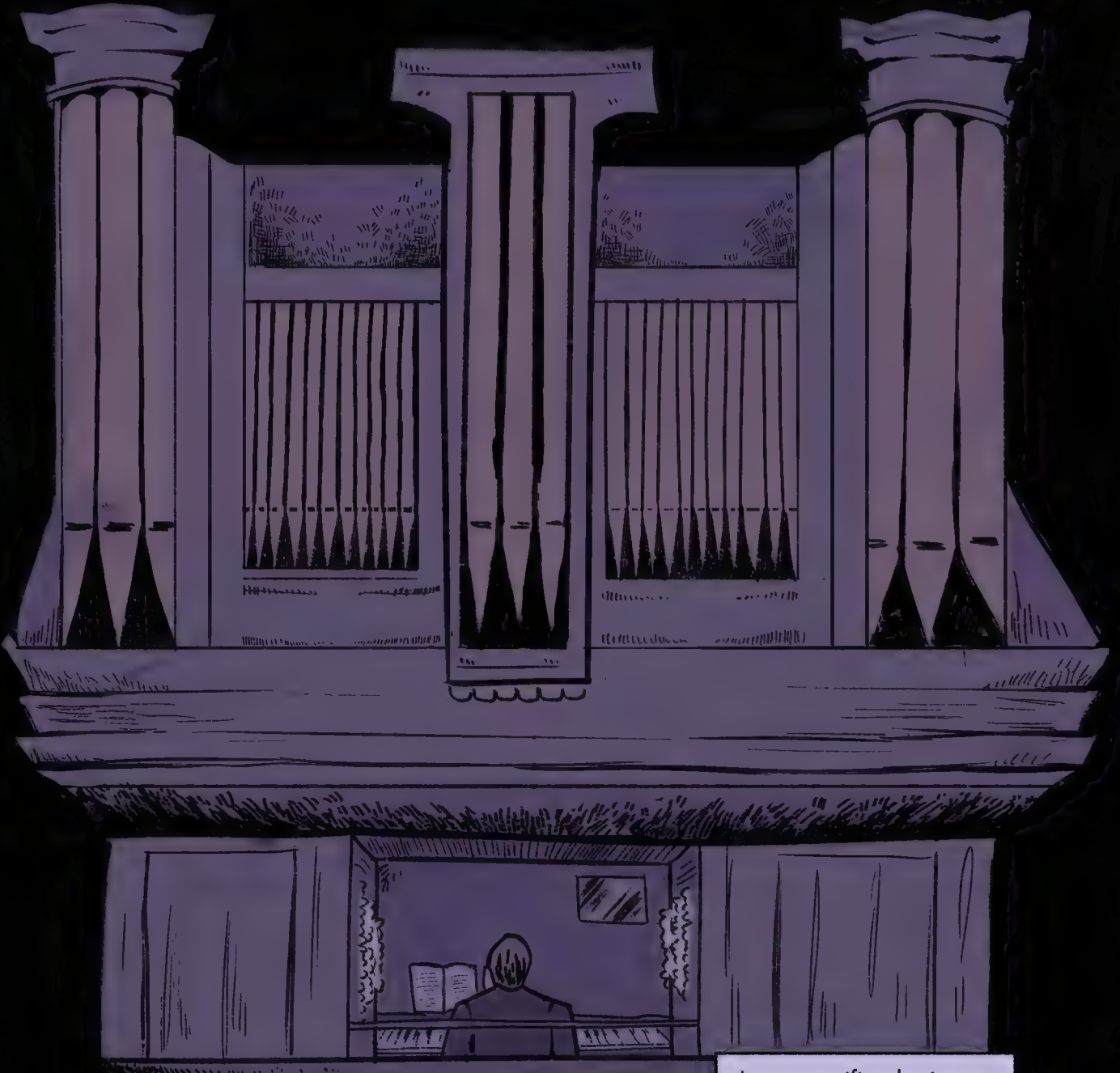
I taught myself how to play the church organ.



That was my main "lockdown project".



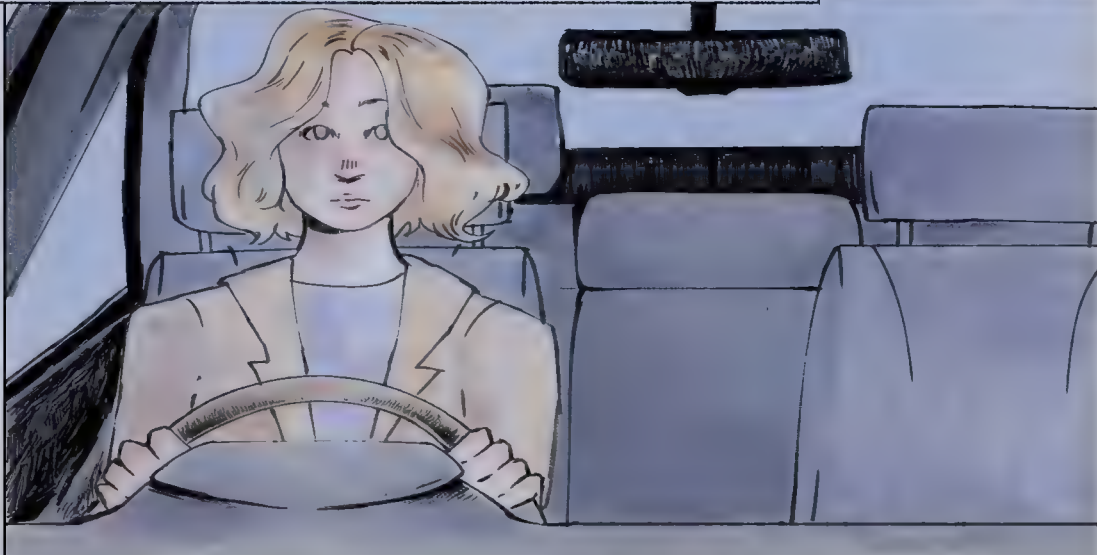
For practicing, you're usually there, by yourself. It is... very atmospheric.



It was terrific playing to people for the first time.

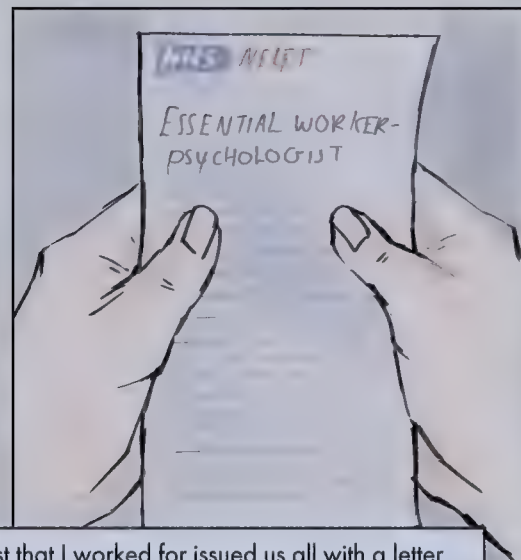
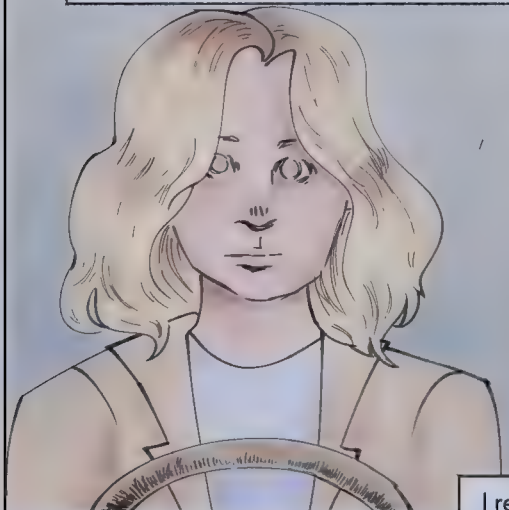


I was still going to work, so I guess that element wasn't very important, although I didn't get the tube anymore and I drove to work.



ROSE

It felt very important. There was suddenly a gravity to what I was doing, I felt a sense of responsibility.



I remember the trust that I worked for issued us all with a letter in case we were stopped by police for breaking lockdown rules.

Which now seems incredibly dramatic, but at the time I guess it held a different gravitas.





I never really felt like I could do enough. I guess I would technically be classed as a front line worker?

I think the majority of people who I know who work in the NHS all felt like a bit of a fraud with the importance that was put on us- this clapping madness, it really increased the imposter syndrome for a lot of my colleagues and I.

It was very hard to say how hard it was, with this strong narrative about being heroes, being super-people- it kind of wasn't true, we're all just people, muddling through and finding it very, very difficult a lot of the time.

It's all very well for me, as a psychologist, who can think about the way that stories shape who we are and create conflicts within us. For nurses, for healthcare assistants, on lower salaries, doing long, long shifts wearing a lot of PPE- there could be no space to think about the conflict that created.





If you would like to hear excerpts from  
the oral histories I recorded, please visit:  
<https://theyearwespentalone.carrd.co>

Or scan the QR code below:



Please note that any views or opinions expressed in this comic by  
participants are entirely the participant's own, and do not necessarily  
reflect the views of me, the author.





# WITH THANKS

This comic would not have been possible without the contributions of the people who choose to participate. Thank you for giving up your time and trusting me with your stories.

In particular I would like to thank:

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Matilda

Peter

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Jill

Daisy

Martin Wheatley

"Rose"

Nathan Costa hunter

Heather

Jean

"Morphius"

Tom Webb

Amanda

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And the tutors on VCD!



"WE WERE  
ALL JUST  
KIND OF EXISTING,  
WEREN'T WE?"